



## Dhaka: madness, resilience and love

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Living in Dhaka is an adventure like no other; a chaotic symphony where every moment feels like a test of resilience. The city thrives on contradictions, making survival an art form and endurance a badge of honour.

Traffic in Dhaka isn't just bad – it's a way of life. Hours spent in gridlock have become a ritual of self-reflection, a chance to catch up on podcasts, or simply an opportunity to watch time slip by. Pedestrians face their own challenges, navigating sidewalks that double as bustling marketplaces, complete with street vendors, and tea stalls. Walking here is less about reaching your destination and more about mastering the art of obstacle courses.

Dhaka's rivers tell a tragic story. Once lifelines of the city, they have become dumping grounds of epic proportions. Taking a dip in these polluted waters isn't just a health risk – it's practically a death sentence. The air is no better, offering a smog-laden cocktail of dust and exhaust fumes. Breathing in Dhaka is a sensory experience no one signs up for, but must endure nonetheless.

Driving in Dhaka is less about getting somewhere and more about survival. Honking horns create the city's unofficial soundtrack, while traffic



rules are treated as mere suggestions. If you think being a passenger is safer, an electric rickshaw ride will swiftly redefine your understanding of fear.

Meanwhile, garbage disposal follows a simple philosophy: out of sight, out of mind. Trash piles up wherever it pleases, adding to the city's evolving landscape of debris.

The weather brings its own flair to life in Dhaka, shifting unpredictably between scorching heat, torrential rain,

and waterlogging. On any given day, you might need an umbrella, a boat, and industrial-strength sunscreen – all at once.

Yet, amidst this chaos, there's an odd kind of entertainment. Public disputes, spontaneous rallies, and the sheer thrill of navigating overcrowded streets create a live-action drama that keeps life interesting.

Despite all this, Dhaka's people remain remarkably optimistic. The

city's residents continue to adapt, laugh at its absurdities, and find joy in its madness.

With all its imperfections, Dhaka is a city that pulses with life and energy. The vibrant street life, filled with the laughter of children playing and the chatter of neighbours, creates a sense of community that transcends the daily struggles. Each narrow alley and bustling market tell a story, revealing the heart and soul of its people. This city, rich in culture and tradition, invites you to embrace its quirks and idiosyncrasies, reminding us that beauty often lies in the unexpected. The resilience of its residents shines through in their unwavering spirit, proving that even amidst adversity, joy can flourish.

To truly appreciate Dhaka, one must look beyond the chaos and see the potential for transformation. This city needs our love and commitment to foster change, to advocate for cleaner air and revitalised rivers, and to support sustainable practices that honour its rich heritage.

Dhaka isn't just a city – it's a trial by fire, a celebration of resilience, and a test of patience. If you can thrive in its chaos and embrace its contradictions, you'll find that Dhaka isn't like any other place.

## Govt set to repurpose \$670m loans

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It will improve post-crash care, which is critical in saving lives, and will also set up an ambulance service via a toll-free number and upgrade emergency care services in selected district hospitals and upazila health complexes along the two national highway corridors.

More than 20 months after the project's approval, the authorities could not hire consultants. As of December last year, the project saw less than 1 percent financial progress, documents show.

Subsequently, it was

decided that \$75 million from the project would be repurposed.

Another slow-moving project is the "Livestock and Dairy Development Project" involving Tk 4,280 crore.

The project was launched in January 2019 with the aim of boosting livestock and dairy farming in Bangladesh.

Under the project, 26 types of agricultural machinery alongside chemical products like pesticides would be provided to local farmers.

The WB was supposed to provide \$500 million for the project from December 2018

to September 2023. As the project authority failed to use the loan, the loan period was extended to July 2025.

As of June last year, a total of \$281.58 million was disbursed, according to WB document.

Subsequently, it was decided that \$100 million from the project would be repurposed.

In May 2019, the government signed a \$100.5 million financing agreement with the WB to improve the condition of living in four large neighbourhoods in Dhaka city, benefitting about

a million residents.

The Dhaka City Neighbourhood Upgrading project will enhance public spaces and urban services in four neighbourhoods – Kamrangir Char, Lalbagh, Gullistan, Khilgaon Mugda-Bashabo – under Dhaka South City Corporation.

As of June last year, only \$20.83 million was disbursed, according to documents. Subsequently, it was decided that \$22 million from the project would be redirected.

The other eight slow-moving projects from

which funds will be repurposed are: higher education accreditation and transformation; accelerating and strengthening skills for economic transformation; environment sustainability and transformation; enhancing digital government economy; sustainable forest and livelihood; Bangladesh Private Investment and Digital Entrepreneurship; building resilient infrastructure for adaptation and vulnerability reduction; and developing climate-smart agriculture and water management, according to a ERD document.

## BNP to continue pushing for govt neutrality

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formed as a result of the mass uprising must maintain neutrality. BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul's comments were about neutrality. However, the response to his remarks was aggressive.

BNP Standing Committee member Iqbal Hasan Mahmud Tuku said, "Leaders of the Students Against Discrimination, who are advisers to the interim government, cannot make statements against any political party. This compromises the neutrality of the interim government."

"We consider the interim government to be nonpartisan, but if any member of the government adopts a partisan approach, the government will no longer appear neutral. If advisers want to engage in politics, they must resign first. Then they can criticise other parties, but not while being in the government."

BNP's ally parties have also taken Nahid's comments as an affront. Leaders of allied parties believe his statement was aggressive. These parties will issue statements soon, sources said.

A BNP strategist said the students have somewhat deviated from the spirit of the movement. They are now in a "dream-like state" thinking of forming

a party, holding elections, and returning to power. That way of thinking is inconsistent with the spirit of the mass uprising.

One must go through several phases to enter the broader political arena or be at the centre of power. Since they have not gone through these stages, it is natural that their thoughts are immature.

"That's why the BNP has always avoided disputes with the anti-discrimination activists and tried to resolve issues through discussions with the government," the BNP leader said.

The latest issue has not been formally discussed in any BNP forum. However, internal discussions among leaders revealed that Nahid's statement does not represent the government. If the government reacts, BNP will discuss it with the government.

Besides, not all students support the anti-discrimination movement, which is a small fraction of students who even have differences in opinion, he said.

Political analysts believe the disagreements between BNP and the anti-discrimination activists have deepened as the former want elections immediately while the latter want the opposite.

Moreover, they have differences regarding

issues like removal of the president, abolition of the constitution, and the July uprising declaration. As a result, the rift between the two sides is becoming increasingly evident.

In an exclusive interview with BBC Bangla on Tuesday, Fakhrul said, "If the interim government maintains full neutrality, they will remain in place until the election. Otherwise, there will be a need for a neutral government."

In response, Nahid wrote on Facebook on Thursday afternoon that Fakhrul's demand for a neutral government was essentially a hint towards formation of another 1/11 style government.

A few days ago, BNP talked about a "minus two" strategy, and now it is proposing another 1/11 government to smoothen its path to power.

At least three senior BNP leaders said their party was annoyed by the various actions of the anti-discrimination activists, but refrained from openly reacting until now.

The BNP wants to resolve future crises through discussions.

Many BNP leaders believe that a political party is out to create disputes between them and the students. Events over the past few months have made this clear.

## Laid-off workers slide deep into uncertainty

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"My son is studying at a university. Where will I take him? What will I do?" she asked with tears rolling down her eyes.

Her shoulders slumped as she shared her plight with The Daily Star yesterday. "Other factories don't want to hire me because I'm old. What will happen to us?"

Arati is one of the over 40,000 workers left unemployed by the closures of the factories in mid-December.

Gloom was in the air of Bhabanipur, Tetultala, Mamun Nagar, Latipur, Sreepur, and Roptani, where many of the laid-off workers lived. Groups of men idled at tea stalls, discussing their bleak futures as they grappled with the

aftermath of the closures.

Among them were couple Dholu Roy and Joyonti Roy, who hold on to a faint hope that the factories will reopen.

"If we return to the villages, what would we do? How will we survive?" Dholu asked.

Many families, unable to afford education for their children, have had to make heartbreaking sacrifices. Meher Banu and her husband Abdur Rahim, both former Beximco workers, could not enrol their two children in school this year.

"We couldn't pay last month's house rent. Now we're eating two meals a day instead of three. My husband tried to find work as a day labourer but only managed one or two days of work a week. Even our

children's education is on hold," said Meher, who now lives in Latipur.

She also expressed concern about their provident fund money, for which Tk 800 had been deducted monthly from their salaries for 12 years.

"If we could get that money, we might find a way to survive," she said.

Others, like Manjila Begum and Aleya Begum, shared similar stories of being unable to admit their children to school this year.

Meanwhile, Tonna Ram, a day labourer whose wife was also a Beximco factory worker, said life had always been difficult, but now it has become unbearable.

"We're planning to move to our village in Dinajpur's

Parbatipur. We used to support my parents with our earnings. I don't know what we'll do in the village, but we can't survive here anymore," he said.

Workers desperate for employment have been turned away by nearby factories, as many refuse to hire former Beximco employees.

"I've visited all the nearby factories, but they won't hire me because I worked for Beximco. What's our fault?" asked Milan Roy.

"I've spent all my savings. If I can't find work soon, my family will have to live on the street," he said.

The ripple effects of the closures extend to small businesses in the area.

Rifat Khan, a grocer in

Tetultala, said the exodus of workers has jeopardised his livelihood.

"If the workers leave, it will be difficult to keep my shop running. I've been here for four years. I don't know what I'll do if my business collapses. My family lives here, and we can't suddenly move elsewhere," Rifat said.

Most of the residents of these areas said that the factory closures have left entire communities in turmoil, their futures uncertain, and their dreams shattered.

"As they face these challenges, people of these areas cling to one hope – that the factories will reopen and life will regain some semblance of normalcy," said Jashim Mandal, a local.

## 'Will leave govt if we decide to contest polls'

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In an interview with BBC Bangla published on Wednesday, Fakhrul said, "The interim government cannot oversee the election if it fails to remain neutral. In that case, a neutral government will be needed."

He added that questions of neutrality might arise given some student leaders' plan to form a political party.

Nahid said if any allegation or statement about neutrality arises during the election, it should be clearly stated what specific changes the government needs to make to ensure neutrality.

At the same time, it should be considered whether the question of neutrality will arise over pro-BNP individuals holding various administrative or constitutional positions, he said.

But it is too early for such

considerations, Nahid added.

Asked about Fakhrul's reference to another 1/11-styled government, he said discussions about such a 1/11-styled government and the "minus two" formula were actually introduced by the BNP in the political arena.

"For some unknown reasons, the BNP seems to believe that this government was formed solely to hold an election," he said.

The 2007-2008 caretaker government is widely called the 1/11 government since it was formed on January 11, 2007, after a series of events. Many politicians believe there was a conspiracy to banish BNP Chairperson Khaleda Zia and Awami League President Sheikh Hasina from politics. Some call this idea the "minus two" formula.

Nahid said when power

transitions through an election, it results in an elected government. But the current interim government came to power through a popular uprising for an interim period with the mandate to hold trials of the perpetrators of the AL regime, carry out reforms and oversee an election.

"For us, holding trials and reforms are equally important. We, the students, joined the government to act as a watchdog and to see whether the government can properly implement commitments made during the uprising," he said.

Nahid referred to former Awami League minister Arifat Rahman's Facebook post seeking a neutral government to hold fair elections, describing the interim government as illegal and unelected.

BNP's tone is similar to that of AL's Arifat, the adviser said.

However, having a neutral government or holding an impartial election does not mean creating space for the Awami League or treating them neutrally, he added. "We will not accept any conspiracy hatched to provide shelter to the Awami League in the name of neutrality."

Mentioning that legal proceedings are underway against the AL perpetrators, Nahid said, "From the very beginning, we have stated that we want a reconciliation process. For that to happen, the Awami League has to apologise, but we see no such inclination on its part. Therefore, our plan is to ensure justice by trying those involved in enforced disappearance, murder, corruption, and electoral fraud."

## Yunus for a mechanism

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go for the short agenda or the long agenda.

Prof Yunus said they have targeted the end of this year for the election to take place if people go for a quick reform agenda. "If people say no, we need to carry out more reforms, then we need another six months."

The chief adviser also spoke of the student protests that led to the fall of Sheikh Hasina's 15-year rule in August last year.

Prof Yunus also described the reforms the interim government is undertaking to prepare the country of 171 million people for the elections.

He said technology has changed the young generation – they are not Bangladeshi young people anymore; they are global young people.

The chief adviser said the demands from the student movement were that they do not want to go back to the "old Bangladesh", so they must make a "new Bangladesh".

The chief adviser also discussed about a "consensus commission" aimed at building agreement among all political parties and civil society organisations in Bangladesh about the reforms. This effort would culminate in a "July Charter," named after the month of the historic uprising in Bangladesh.

Encouraging the young people to become entrepreneurs, the chief adviser states, "This generation is a generation of entrepreneurs."

Klaus Schwab, impressed by the chief adviser's speech, expressed his satisfaction over the "exceptional" half-hour conversation with a "visionary" man.

**BANGLADESHI LDC GRADUATION**

Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, director general of World Trade Organisation, yesterday said the global trade body would help Bangladesh graduate smoothly from Least Developed Country (LDC) and persuade top

businesses to shift their supply chains to the South Asian nation.

The DG made the comments when she met Prof Yunus on the sidelines of the WEF meeting.

"We have established principles. We will be working with you," Chief Adviser's Deputy Press Secretary Abul Kalam Azad Majumder quoted Ngozi as saying.

The DG also said she was talking to top global businesses and trying to persuade them to relocate their supply chains to Bangladesh as part of global logistic decentralisation.

Prof Yunus said Bangladesh is now open for business, after years of misrule and oligarchs-linked business deals which ruined the country's economy.

He added that Bangladesh can easily be one of the largest manufacturing hubs with millions of young and tech-savvy skilled workers.

The chief adviser said the interim government was carrying out vital reforms in the economy and eased congestion in Chittagong Port in an effort to attract more foreign investment.

"We've also launched a fight against corruption," he said.

Ngozi said she was impressed by the spirits of the young protesters during the July mass uprising. "They have set an unprecedented example sending the most impactful messages."

She also praised the leadership of Prof Yunus in bringing stability to the country.

During the talks at a Davos hotel, Ngozi urged Bangladesh to ratify the fisheries subsidy agreement. Bangladesh will look into it, the chief adviser said.

Prof Yunus, who reached Switzerland on Tuesday afternoon to attend the WEF's annual meeting, is scheduled to leave Davos for Dhaka last night (Switzerland time) wrapping up his four-day visit with nearly 50 engagements. He will reach home today.